Quietwriter classy, but not perfect

Last week we discussed when you should "buy IBM." This week, I'm going to look at one piece of IBM equipment you may definitely want to wait on.

IBM's Quietwriter line of printers is impressive enough. The printers use a phenomenal new technology called resistive ribbon thermal transfer. Like the Hewlett-Packard LaserJet — a small laser printer I reviewed in an earlier column (write to me for a copy if you missed it) — the Quietwriter is very quiet and offers beautiful print quality. It was unveiled last October, and many dealers are now demonstrating the product. Some have machines in stock for immediate delivery.

No print wheel

Unlike the laser printers that print a whole page at a time, the Quietwriter appears to operate like a conventional daisy-wheel printer — except that there's no print wheel.

The print head travels back and forth across the paper, and the ink just seems to be painted on the page. Actually, ink from the ribbon is literally melted onto the paper by electrodes in the print head, which selectively heat the ribbon as it presses against the paper.

The results are impressive:

✔ Excellent print quality. The character images are as good as or better than any impact printer I've seen, and several fonts are available.

✔ Much less noise than with impact printers. While the Quietwriter isn't silent — mainly because of a noisy ribbon advance mechanism and the whine of the carriage returns — the noise level is still much less bothersome than with impact printers.

✔ Faster and competitively priced. With speeds of 40 to 60 characters per second and a base price of only $1,395 (add about $350 for a cut-sheet feeder), the Quietwriter is in the

same ballpark as the most popular daisy-wheel printers on the market today.

That's the good news. The bad news is that the Quietwriter has one very important limitation and several annoying features that probably will limit its acceptance, at least in the short run.

The most important drawback is that the Quietwriter presently has many of the same software compatibility problems as H-P's LaserJet. It is not yet clear exactly what non-IBM supported software will run on the Quietwriter, but it is doubtful that many programs do at this time.

On the other hand, though, it is likely that developers of major programs will quickly make them compatible with the Quietwriter. That's one advantage of having the market clout IBM has; the developers will do some of the work for you.

Meanwhile, IBM says that only their own supported software — not a very long list — will run on the printer. The company even hedges on that in its literature, saying that it hasn't had a chance to test all the functions in the software IBM supports. In other words, things might be a little flaky in the beginning.

Waxy letters

Another potentially serious problem is the way the Quietwriter's print feels to the touch. Characters made by impact printers have no feel at all, but the Quietwriter's print has a sticky or waxy feel to it. It doesn't smudge, and doesn't seem to come off on your fingers or onto other pages. But that waxy feel doesn't go away, either.

I gave some samples to several secretaries and executives to gauge their reaction. About half thought the print texture was OK; the other half was bothered by it. A quarter of the people I talked with felt it might prevent them from buying the Quietwriter.

Another potentially bothersome feature is an unusual sound made by the ribbon feed mechanism, combined with a loud carriage return (this isn't a bi-directional printer). It's nice not to hear the racket of an impact printer, but the unique noises of the Quietwriter take some getting used to — especially after being spoiled by the silence of H-P's LaserJet.

Before buying the Quietwriter, you certainly should wait to find out if your software runs with the printer. If it doesn't already, don't be surprised to wait six months or longer until it is compatible.

During that time, I hope IBM will add bi-directional printing — that would cut down on the whine of carriage returns — and fix the noisy ribbon feed. With some luck as well, they might even figure out a new, less sticky ink formula. That's probably asking too much, though.

In the longer run — six to 12 months in this industry — my bet is that the new laser printer technology, embodied in machines such as H-P's LaserJet, will be offered by a dozen or more competitors.

That will bring down prices and increase the amount of compatible software. The laser printer looks to me like it has a greater potential of becoming a workhorse product than the Quietwriter, and a better chance of replacing the millions of noisy daisy-wheel printers that will be wearing out in years ahead.

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